

FLEET FOCUS

‘Channel fever’: Fletcher returns home



J03 Brenda M. Diggs photo

Sailors man the rails of USS Fletcher (DD 992) as they return to Pearl Harbor Saturday from a six-month Western Pacific deployment. Fletcher set new standards for Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO) while deployed in the Arabian Gulf as part of the Abraham Lincoln Battle Group (ALBG).

By Ens. Malia Spofford
USS Fletcher Public Affairs

Some call it anxiety, excitement, anticipation, happiness, even depression.

“It’s a kind of insomnia,” said Hull Technician 3rd Class Chad Fiers. After 175 days away from Pearl Harbor, USS Fletcher (DD 992) has finally returned home. But in the final few hours before its homecoming - every crewmember had what can only be described as “channel fever.” The following is a recollection and interpretation of the feelings and events leading up to Fletcher’s return home.

The crew is down hard, but Doc can’t fix this one - nothing can alter the fact that within hours, Fletcher will be moored at B25 pier in her homeport, with families and friends gathered in celebration.

Sailors can’t sleep, they can’t stop playing cards and watching movies. Even bingo doesn’t help. They can’t stop talking about the past six months and the next six months to come.

The fever burning in their cheeks is the rightful pride of U.S. Navy Sailors who have traveled nearly 45,500 miles since Aug. 26, 2000, defend-

ing those American values to which they now return.

Now that they are coming home, any WESTPAC (Western Pacific) Sailor will recount to you the growth and surge in understanding of themselves and of the Navy that he or she experienced while carrying out our nation’s business.

Fletcher Sailors improved both professionally and personally, excelling as a team during three months of operations in the Arabian Gulf.

Seventy-seven Sailors attained their Enlisted Surface Warfare Specialist (ESWS) pins, after months of signatures, walk-throughs, memorization and a final oral board.

In addition to these silver cutlasses, 15 junior officers attained their Surface Warfare Officer (SWO) qualification, proving their proficiency as watchstanders and warfare professionals in a deployed environment.

Fletcher set new standards for Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO) while deployed in the Arabian Gulf as part of the Abraham Lincoln Battle Group (ALBG). Fletcher leed in the enforcement of United Nations Resolution 986 and helped decrease the amount of smuggled oil leaving Iraq by

49 percent. Fletcher Sailors conducted more than 100 boardings, including a record of 25 boardings in five days.

MIO team members, led by Lt. j.g. Michael P. Longazel, also stood weeks of security watches on diverted smuggler vessels. Fletcher became so talented at her mission that her officers and crew were sought out to train Polish, Kuwaiti and British teams.

Long days, night operations and an increased threat condition following the USS Cole incident made the months in the gulf particularly challenging, yet equally rewarding.

One of Fletcher’s Sailors, Intelligence Specialist 1st Class (SW) Nicholas Steging embodied the battle group ideal through his extensive work in creating intelligence databases about merchant vessels in the gulf.

He received personal congratulations from Vice Adm. Moore, Fifth Fleet Commander, for his “unprecedented level of front line support” and “outstanding professional service.” Steging was also named Destroyer Squadron 31 Sailor of the Year.

Steging was just one of Fletcher’s leaders during these months of becoming a

team of MIO “superstars.”

A change of command came just in time for the holidays. Cmdr. Christopher D. Noble, who led Fletcher through workups and the first half of deployment, was relieved on Nov. 30, 2000 by Cmdr. Dell W. Epperson.

“A change of command is always a disruptive time for a crew, but particularly so in the middle of a deployment,” noted Epperson. “But this crew was so well-trained and professional they never missed a beat. My job is easy thanks to them.”

Spending Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years at sea was lonely for all those who missed their families, but packages and letters from home - from friends and strangers alike - as well as the excellent meals provided by Fletcher mess specialists, eased the pain of being away.

Days after ringing in the new millenium, Fletcher departed the gulf and headed toward Darwin, Australia, her first liberty port of deployment.

This port was followed by three days of highly successful community relations work in Dili, East Timor, where Fletcher Sailors hosted local youth and U.N. peacekeeping force VIPs, helped rebuild a community center, and distributed donated goods to an orphanage and medical clinic through Project HandClasp. Exhausted but proud, Fletcher proceeded towards Townsville and Brisbane - her two most popular liberty ports on Australia’s eastern coast.

“Brisbane was definitely the best part of deployment for me,” said Gas Turbine Systems (Electrical) Fireman Charles Smith.

Brisbane, located between the Sunshine and Gold Coasts of Australia, combined the civic hospitality common to Australian cities with trendy flair, featuring inventive dining and entertainment.

Both Townsville and Brisbane offered many leisure activities, including horseback riding and scuba diving, shopping and dancing.

Sailors cited the friendliness of the Australians and the beauty of the land as their principal reasons for

enjoying Australia so much. Opals, stuffed kangaroo and koala toys, boomerangs, diggeridos and t-shirts fill lockers and drawers as typical souvenirs bought for family and friends in the land down under.

Australia reminded many people of home, as did the small island of Tutuila in American Samoa, Fletcher’s last stop before continuing on to Pearl Harbor.

Cliffs lush with tropical foliage, torch ginger and plumeria, dropping down to the sandy coasts, had Fletcher Sailors longing for their beloved ‘island-style’ once again.

Sailors, jittery with ‘channel fever’, look forward to the things at home which many people take for granted. A kiss from their spouse, a ballgame with the kids and the dog, a homecooked meal, the chance to drive their own cars or sit on their own couch.

“I want to get home so I can scratch where it itches,” joked Gas Turbine Systems (Electrical) 2nd Class (SW) Ronny Travis. Getting home means a chance for new dads to see their newborn babies, delivered during deployment. Electrician’s Mate Third Class (SW) Jean Rempart’s daughter Kaili was born on Feb. 9 to his wife Karlee. Rempart has been through this once before.

“I’ve had two WESTPACs and two babies,” said Rempart.

Home, for him and others, means getting to hold those babies at last.

Leaving everything but their values and shipmates behind, Fletcher Sailors, some only 18 years old, bravely completed an arduous deployment and now receive the supreme reward - returning to what they love best, stronger and smarter than they were before.

Though the work is hard - no one will deny this - it is great and important work. Just ask the 46 Fletcher Sailors who re-enlisted during this WESTPAC.

World ambassadors and warriors, technical wizards and strategists, laborers and inventors - there may never have been Naval crews so diverse and proficient.

Congratulations Fletcher! And welcome home!

HSL-37 ‘Easyriders’ return from deployment

By Lt. j.g. Chris Escajeda
HSL-37 Public Affairs

Few occasions in this sea-going profession are more anxiously anticipated than a Sailor’s return from extended deployment.

For the Easyriders of HSL-37 Detachment Seven, Feb. 17 marked the end of both a personal and professional journey that spanned six months, two hemispheres, 15 time zones, seven countries, two entire oceans, and what seemed a lifetime away from family and friends.

As part of the Light Airborne Multipurpose System, “LAMPS,” community, Detachment Seven played a unique role on board USS Fletcher (DD 992).

Often tasked to complement the ship’s own capabilities, as well as perform autonomously within the greater carrier battle group, the detachment amassed more than 700 flight hours in support of the multi-national forces conducting Maritime Interdiction Operations in the Northern Arabian Gulf.

Equipped with night vision goggles and forward-looking infrared, pilots and aircrew performed what has arguably become the most significant mission in rotary wing aviation - the identification and interdiction of oil smugglers transiting Gulf waters in violation of United Nations sanctions.

During one memorable stretch, the detachment sustained these operations for 62 continuous days at sea. Prepared for all eventualities, ordnance load teams and maintenance crews readied the detachment’s SH-60B “Seahawk” helicopters with live, forward-firing ordnance for multiple missions to execute Abraham Lincoln Battle Group (ALBG) tasking.

These same men exhibited extraordinary and diverse skills while loading Seahawks with experimental variants of anti-submarine torpedoes during operation “Arabian Shark,” an under sea warfare exercise involving navies of the Arabian Gulf coalition.

Upon exiting the gulf, Detachment Seven remained an instrument of American foreign policy as members went ashore as part of a humanitarian delegation in Dili, East Timor.

Perhaps more remarkable than the detachment’s many collective achievements were the professional gains made by its individual members.

In a single six-month period, five Detachment Seven petty officers were advanced to the next higher paygrade. Ten members achieved advanced warfare qualifications, four of whom were awarded designation in both aviation and surface warfare.

Eight ‘stand-out’ detachment members were awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal for actions that contributed directly and significantly to mission accomplishment in the Fifth Fleet area of responsibility. These achievements were particularly noteworthy given the 12 or more hours each member put into the maintenance and repair of detachment aircraft on a daily basis.

Having made ports of call in Singapore, Bahrain, and Australia, the ‘Easyriders’ of Detachment Seven now look forward to that final flight to Marine Corp Base Hawaii, Kaneohe Bay.

In doing so, they leave behind unparalleled personal and professional success, as well as an unstable region whose equilibrium was maintained due to their presence.

As stewards of the sacred and on-going tradition of service at sea, they truly have much for which to be proud.

‘Skinny Dragon’ ombudsmen honored for deployment service

By Lt. Mark Brummett
VP-4 Public Affairs

After returning home from a six-month deployment, Patrol Squadron Four (VP 4) honored two outgoing ombudsmen, Laura Peck and Rosa Artilles and current ombudsmen, Lori Curcci-Reed and Grace Galindo for their dedicated service during a recent ceremony at Marine Corps Base Hawaii, Kaneohe Bay.

During this special ceremony held in the VP-4 hanger, the entire squadron assembled and recognized the ombudsmen.

The squadron’s commanding officer, Cmdr. Craig Whitaker and command master chief Mineman Master Chief (SW/AW) Maurice “Mo” Radke presented the ombudsmen with flowers, leis and a squadron plaque commemorating their hard work and dedication.

Navy ombudsmen act as a point of contact between the squadron, squadron member’s dependents and other organizations. The separation of family members while on deployment places additional stress on the

Navy family. As a result, the importance of the ombudsmen greatly increases. All of the ombudsmen were able to reassure and assist in a multitude of issues arising as the result of this separation.

Laura Peck and Rosa Artilles will depart as ‘Skinny Dragon’ ombudsmen, while Lori Curcci-Reed and Grace Galindo will continue their duties for the next year. The inter-deployment training cycle will offer new challenges and opportunities to excel for the ombudsmen.

Flying the P-3 Orion, the Navy’s premier maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft, the Skinny Dragons finished a successful WESTPAC deployment on Dec. 8, 2000. Between June-December 2000, they maintained two deployment sites in Japan, one in Misawa and the other on the island of Okinawa.

Conducting Under Sea Warfare (USW), Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), and Precision Strike Targeting (PST) missions, VP-4 supported Seventh Fleet operations in the Western Pacific theater.



PH2 Jay Pearson photo

Patrol Squadron Four Commanding Officer Cmdr. Craig Whitaker presents one of four Ombdsman, Laura Peck, with a token of appreciation. Other Ombudsmen honored were Grace Galindo, Rosa Artilles, and Lori Curcci-Reed.

VP-9 ‘Golden Eagles’ successfully complete FLEETEX 2001

By Lt. Greg Petrovich
VP-9 Public Affairs



From Jan. 21 to Feb. 1, Patrol Squadron Nine (VP-9) ‘Golden Eagles’ supported the USS Constellation Battle Group Joint Fleet Exercise (FLEETEX) during its deployment to Naval Air Station (NAS) North Island, Calif.

During FLEETEX, the detachment supported 10 maritime patrol aircraft from four countries, and seven squadrons.

In preparation for FLEETEX 2001, VP-9 repre-

sentatives attended numerous planning and coordination conferences in order to ensure better integration of Maritime Patrol Aviation (MPA) assets into the USS Constellation’s battle group structure.

Since the Constellation battle group and VP-9 will be deploying together to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Gulf regions, proper integration of MPA assets was critical to successful operations.

On Jan. 21, VP-9 began sorties in support of the Constellation battle group. Crews from VP-9 were tasked with a wide variety of exercise missions during the course of a simulated hostile situation.

The tasking included Undersea Warfare (UW), Anti-Surface Warfare (ASW) and Armed Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ASR). The exercise scenario was designed to simulate a period

of increased tensions and hostilities in an area similar to the Arabian Gulf region.

The variety of tasks assigned to the aircrews required maximum flexibility and adaptability on the part of each and every crew. The wide variety of missions pushed each crew’s professionalism and training to the limit.

On station performance by all crews was exceptional despite working in this challenging operational environment.

In support of this exercise, maintenance personnel from both VP-9 and VP-46 worked tirelessly to maintain all aircraft.

Due to their hard work, the detachment flew more than 50 successful sorties and logged more than 250 mishap free flight hours in a challenging environment.